

Cherisse Scott

Senate Judiciary Committee Testimony - Summer Study Hearing on SB 1236

Hello and thank you for having me today. My name is Cherisse Scott and I'm the founder and CEO of SisterReach. I am also a woman of Christian faith, a mother and a servant to God's people. For almost 8 years, our non-profit grassroots organization has been working to support the sacred self-determination and the reproductive autonomy of women and teens of color, poor and rural women, LGBT+ people, and their families through the framework of Reproductive Justice. The framework was created to center the lived experiences of Black women around issues of reproductive and sexual health including the universal human right to dignity, self-determination, and autonomy. Reproductive justice seeks to liberate and emancipate vulnerable populations from all forms of reproductive and sexual oppression and challenges us to expand our analysis beyond abortion to be inclusive of the myriad other issues that preclude women and people who give birth from achieving reproductive and sexual autonomy.

That said, I am not here to testify about abortion access in a vacuum, because doing so dishonors the lived experiences of vulnerable people who can give birth in our state, the social and economic disparities which inform their daily choices of all kinds including their reproductive health choices and most importantly, the outright and intentional abandonment by the Tennessee state legislature of these vulnerable people who happen to comprise all races, classes, religions, socio-economic statuses and those who do not profess any faith. I am here to testify on behalf of all of them – the thousands of vulnerable people in Tennessee who would be hurt by Senate Bill 1236 – as it, for many, is the final straw in a political pattern of vile, racist, un-American and un-Christian legislation that has come from the majority of this body's leadership.

The state of Tennessee's reproductive health disparities lay at your feet, not those of us who support women's sacred self-determination. Your consistent and intentional objection of withholding life-saving, sexual behavior changing, comprehensive reproductive and sexual health education from youth and college students by mandating abstinence-based education is why our STI and unintended pregnancy statistics rival national averages. Your intentional and uncompromising objection to expanding Medicaid in a state where more than half of its people have dire health disparities is irresponsible. And three years after you have gotten the leadership in the White House the majority of this legislature desired; you still have not put forth a plan of action to ensure healthcare that would save our lives and help us make more comprehensive decisions about our pregnancies. You have denied us the opportunity for every member of our families to live, and then claim to be pro-life. You have cherry-picked the parts of this state that would expand its behavioral and mental health services, and then race to put sick people who struggle with substance use disorder in prison and take away their children all while claiming to care about babies and families. You have stood in your righteous indignation and watched undocumented families be destroyed by ICE in this state, you have dismantled their families in the name of democracy, you have ambiguously offered undocumented women birth control methods to hinder them from having more children. You have denied hardworking families the opportunity at a living wage, yet hold them responsible through legislation that punitively disciplines them for their rage, or their inability to be present to raise their children. No one can raise children properly when they have to work 3 jobs to provide a 40-hour work week of pay. You have targeted people because of their sexual orientation with vitriol and hate. Your political track record shows no mercy or compassion for them or their lives and judgment is not yours to hold over their souls, yet you have stepped out of your mortal positions and have wedged your fear, hatred, and misinterpretation of biblical text over their lives and families as if YOU are God and as if YOU

have a heaven or hell to place them in. You have denied us comprehensive education reform, oversaturated our boards of education with mandates for better testing scores, disempowered and underpaid our teachers, supported the privatization of our schools with no check and balances to ensure quality education, then are angered when you see 20-year olds on the welfare system. You weren't concerned with whether or not they could read or count, only if they could test well to shore up your education benefit funding. Many of them are under-employable because they never received fundamental education to navigate the workforce yet you expect them to understand their sexual and reproductive health?! Meanwhile, the only environment you've created among these instances is one that would lead Tennesseans to need abortions, under-care for or neglect their children regardless to whether or not they want to or are able to parent.

Which brings us to where we are today – in a state full of people who, without God's help and mercy, have nothing to look forward to but being a permanent underclass. Yet somehow, you expect them to be assets to our society and not liabilities and shame them when they cannot achieve the unachievable bar you have set with your harmful policy making.

And if all of this was not heartbreaking enough, you wield your political power in Jesus' name. Many of you who claim to be conservative and Christian have weaponized the word of God to forward your political agendas and maintain power and control over the most vulnerable Tennesseans. You have manipulated biblical scripture to align with your colonialist supremacist ideologies, instead of showing mercy and using the power of your political party to liberate each of us – which is and was the actual ministry of Christ. However, my bible teaches me that Jesus came that we might have life, and have that life more abundantly.

Who is the Tennessee state legislature to stand between me and my opportunity at abundant living or my sacred ability to be self-determining? And what makes this legislature so prideful and arrogant that you've wedged your own will between that of my own and God's? What makes you believe God has endowed your sinful flesh with that authority? Are any of us holier than God? Last I checked, all of us who believe, and that includes people who have abortions, are to work out our own soul salvation. Even God honored the self-determination and bodily autonomy of women and mothers throughout scripture. Did not God allow in I Kings 3:16-27, the potential killing of a baby to train one of his 'beloved' leaders on how to wield fair justice and to soothe a grieving mother, who also happened to be a prostitute, the value of honoring another woman's ability to parent even though they both were the outcasts of society? Did he not place King Solomon in a position to administer justice to the prostituting mothers, even though killing the baby was way he proposed to offer that justice? King Solomon's job, much like this legislature, was to offer justice to these women, not make or mandate their decisions for them. He could have offered death to that mother for killing her newborn baby, mistake or not. And yet we see King Solomon do what I've not seen this legislature do – honor the mother's humanity, honor the women's self-determination by allowing them to make the decision on killing the remaining newborn child. This was God-ordained justice.

We all know there is no scripture that uses abortion terminology, yet the text demonstrates countless opportunities where God condoned the death of vulnerable babies to chastise disobedience, correct behavior, heal broken hearts or even usher in liberation. What more was the death of King David & Bathsheba's baby, if it were not a God-ordained abortion to chastise David's sinful and gluttonous behavior with Bathsheba? [2 Samuel 12:1-24]. We have politicized the abortion debate long enough on the back of our risen Savior whose own vulnerable life was aborted so that we might have access to God and eternal life. The

definition of Abortion is the termination of life, whether it be a fetus or a living and breathing human being.

I sit here before you a living testimony of what an empowered and educated individual looks like when given the tools to make comprehensive choices about my life and reproductive health. I've had 3 abortions in my lifetime, and the only thing that changed my sexual behavior was the compassion of an individual who showed me my ignorance, challenged me to change my sexual behavior through comprehensive sex education and walked me through that process until I got it good enough that I could teach others about their bodies. That was the compassionate action of one individual. What more could this legislature do for a state full of people who do not understand their sexual and reproductive health? My bible teaches me in Hosea 4:6 that we die due to a lack of knowledge. The heartbreak is that TN abortion rates could be much lower if this legislative body would not stand as a barrier to the very education I received. Instead, Tennessee has taken shortcuts by pushing long acting reversible contraception on vulnerable women and girls whether they be citizens, undocumented or incarcerated. Yet, our rates of STIs, like chlamydia, gonorrhea and HIV almost triple the national average among youth and adults. Instead, Tennessee has chosen eugenics over healthcare access which includes comprehensive sexuality education and all methods of birth control.

Your political actions have exacerbated these issues and you must take responsibility for it now. Allow me to call you in and offer you an opportunity to repent for the ways you have perverted your role as politicians. The politician is not God and John 13:16 states that "no servant is greater than its master, nor its messenger greater than the one that sent him." Your constituents are the people who made your jobs possible so as Philippians 2:3&4 states "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interest of others." You have a mandate to love your neighbor and offer them every opportunity at an abundant life. And make no mistake. I am a firm believer that people ought to take responsibility for their actions, but you cannot expect anyone to take responsibility for something they don't know, don't have access to, are not stakeholders in, or don't trust you enough to believe you care about their lives. Black women in particular will be harmed and criminalized by this law though our sexual behavior has never been corrected since slavery. We were brought to this country to breed and labor. We continue that pattern of birthing our children to this day. And history has already shown us what Black mothers will do if we do not have access to safe and legal abortion, birth control methods, healthcare or a society that supports us. It is irresponsible of this legislature to push vulnerable women and girls back into unsafe abortions. Your job, like King Solomon's, is to create a just society where all can flourish and not make decisions out of trauma, lack, poverty, danger or fear.

A wise preacher named Rev. E. Dewey Smith once said "you cannot antagonize and evangelize at the same time." If you want the state of abortions to decrease, it will take a concerted effort from this legislature working with, not against, medical providers like Planned Parenthood and the myriad of advocates like SisterReach who have been on the frontline trying to correct the public health wrongs of this legislative body. Isaiah 10:1 & 2 (NIV) states "whoa to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people." You have an opportunity to set a new precedent by righting the wrong of SB1236 and to model for this country what justice looks like for the most vulnerable.

I urge you to vote against this dangerous bill and work with us to change the culture of sexual behavior in our state together. Thank you for your time.